



ELSAH HISTORY

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Over the years your editor has seen at least seven tintype photographs of Elsay scenes, apparently taken on one visit around 1885 to 1887. Often the same people appear in these pictures, and they illustrate a number of things about life in our community one hundred years ago. Recently, one of our members, Howard Brock Elder of Orlando, Florida, gave us an extended loan of one of the original tintypes. This important document shows the corner of Mill and Maple streets, looking from the vacant lot where the sign points up to Principia College. The lone figure posing against the fence is almost certainly Billy Onetto, who died in February, 1892, at the age of 67. The stone house pictured in the background is Onetto's, built sometime after his arrival in Elsay in 1853. He was a widower at the time of this tintype, which would account for the fact that he is the only person in the picture. He was a blacksmith by trade, and the extensive outbuildings shown in the background attest to the space needed for his work. In the inventory of his estate there is mention of 21 beehives and a step ladder (valued at \$10). Those may be the curious boxes that are piled up against the barn. Note the plank sidewalks, the mud in the street, and the buggy on the far left of the picture. We are very grateful to Mr. Elder for his generosity, and we hope that our members will enjoy seeing one more evidence of change in Elsay in the past century.

In the fall of 1984 and the winter of 1985 Mrs. Carol Maxwell interviewed Bob Lowder about his memories of life in Elsah going back into the 1920's, his earliest childhood memories. The interviews are extensive and we only present here and in future issues a few of the highlights from the tapes. We have preserved the original wording, including Carol's questions and Flora Lowder's comments, so that the reader can understand the answers fully. This first sample from the conversations includes stories about road-building in Elsah and the functioning of the local school. We hope in future issues to cover other stories that were a part of the Lowder interviews.

AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB LOWDER, PART I

Q. When I was reading the minutes of the town board, I couldn't believe how much work they had to do on the roads. It was just constant.

A. Oh yeah.

Q. So you still have to keep at it? There's still work on the roads a lot?

A. Yeah.

Q. Even though they're blacktop now?

A. You have to, well, yeah, you've got to keep — you've got to patch 'em, you know, and then they have to be resurfaced. Every so many years, they have to be resurfaced. And, of course, your ditches along the side have to be kept clean to try to keep the water out of the road, because that's the most dangerous thing to the road is to let water in there and then freeze, and that ruins your blacktop.

Q. Do you remember before the roads were blacktop, when they were dirt? Were they just dirt?

A. Well, no, they were gravel, and they were all gravel from the gravel out of the creeks here in the village, this Askew Creek. And my dad and my uncle used to have a team of wagons and they used to do all of the rock hauling and most all of the gravelling of the roads here in the village.

Q. How did they do it?

A. Just go through the creeks and find a good gravel bed. In their wagons they had what they called a dump box, and it was just boards, 2 X 6 boards or 2 X 4, and they would just come apart, and that's the way they'd dump it. They'd just keep folding 'em back until they'd unload their load.

Q. So the bottom of the wagon was just boards that you could turn?

A. Yeah, you could just turn 'em over, each board. Each board was turned. They weren't fastened together. They were just cleated so they wouldn't slip off of the bolsters of the wagon.

Q. And did it have sides?

A. Yeah, 10-inch, about a 10-inch side. And those sides lifted off, too. A lot of times, why, the creek gravel would be too coarse, so they would hire some of us kids around to screen gravel in the creeks. Me and Herb Fessler and Billy Crandell, some more that lived around here, why, we'd stand there in the creek, and we had a big

screen with a big 2 X 4 frame with hardware cloth on the back of it. And we had it sittin' at an angle, and we'd throw this gravel up on it. And the fine gravel that we wanted, it'd go through it, and the big gravel would run back down at us, and we'd just pitch it out of the way.

Q. Was that in the summer?

A. Yeah, any time we needed it.

Q. Oh, you'd even do it in the cold weather?

A. Yeah, we have. Whenever, you know. I mean, when the ground would thaw out, why, we'd have to go in and put new gravel in some of the soft spots, and....

Q. So, was it that they couldn't find the small gravel, or that they couldn't find any gravel that they could use, or they just really needed small gravel for those patches?

A. Well, the main thing was that if you get too coarse a gravel, it makes the road too rough, and that's the reason for screening it and keeping it down to maybe 3/4 of an inch to an inch. No bigger than that.

Q. So when they could find a good gravel bar, they could just shovel it right up? Otherwise, they had to...?

A. Yeah, sometimes they'd hit a gravel bar along in the creek that they could just scoop right out of the gravel bar right onto the wagon, and then they wouldn't have to screen it. We didn't have to screen all of it.

Q. Did you drive the team down in the stream?

A. Yeah, right down in the creeks. There was only one bridge in town that you never could drive a team and wagon under, and that was the one between the schoolhouse and the Methodist Church. You never could drive under that one, but all the other bridges here in town, you could drive a team and wagon under it.

Q. It doesn't sound like it'd be too easy.

A. But that's the way they used to keep the creek here cleaned out was by using the creek gravel out of it on the streets.

Q. Was it deeper then?

A. Oh yeah, a lot deeper. And it'd still run out of its banks sometimes.

Q. So what would you say it was? How deep was the water?

A. Oh, it's just like it is now. I mean, wet weather you'd have water running in it; dry weather was drybed.

Q. How far down did the banks go?

A. Oh, maybe another couple feet deeper than what they are now.

Q. That's quite a bit.

A. Yeah, I've seen the water running down here by Spatz' house [Wright], on that turn there, that's a real sharp turn in the creek. And I've seen the rains hard enough that the water would just come down and run right over that and then from there on down to the other end of town, that'd all be under water. And several times when I was going to grade school down there, and I was in the lower grade, they kicked us kids out through the side windows, and the men here in town would be down there and catch us, and they'd be wearing hip boots and catch us and take us around and shove us upstairs till the water went down.

Q. Did the school get full of water?

A. No. Well, it'd run in a little bit, but it never did hurt anything.

Q. Not bad?

A. But they never did take a chance. Whenever it got up to where it'd be running right up at the porch there in the back, why, the men'd come down and the teachers'd open the windows and start shoving us little kids out the window, and they'd catch us and carry us around and put us on the steps to upstairs.

....

Q. This is your uncle?

A. Yeah, Harry Barnal. He'd trade a horse at the drop of your hat!

Flora. Was he a road commissioner?

A. Road commissioner, yeah.

Flora. He was a road commissioner here at one time.

Q. What does that mean? What does a road commissioner do?

A. Took care of the township roads, all of the township roads. I mean, Elsay township. And he was, for about, I don't know, was it 12 or 14 years, he did that.

And at that time there weren't any hard surface roads. They were all gravel or dirt, and they had to be dug and graded and everything like that. And he did most all of that with horses.

Q. How did you do it? How did you drag them? With a blade?

A. Yeah, with a regular drag. We had a regular steel drag, and this drag had a lever on it that you could raise and lower your blades to however much you wanted it to cut. And then you set it at an angle and you hook four horses to it. Generally two teams is the way they did it, and two of them drove. One man drove each team, you know, and the....

Q. So that you walk behind?

A. No, most of the time you rode the drag because you wanted that much weight to make it cut the dirt, because you was wantin' to fill up the ruts in that.

Q. So it would cut it and fill it as it went?

A. Yeah. And then after so much of that, why, then they'd have to turn around then and hook onto the grader and grade the road and pull more dirt up and clean their ditches out and pull more dirt up. That's the

way they used to keep the roads around here.

Q. What would a grader look like? Did it go straight across the road, or did it go at an angle down the ditch or...?

A. No, it was just four wheels, and it had a blade that could be turned like this. And you did that all with two wheels up on top, and there's a platform on the very back end of it that you stood on to control your blade. And there were two wheels that you raised and lowered your blade, and you could raise your blade at an angle. And also you had a lever there that you let your blade up and down with to control however much you wanted to cut.

Q. So you'd go one side of the road and then come back on the other?

A. Yeah.

Q. And put an angle on it that way? So it's sort of like a snowplow blade then?

A. Yeah, something like that, yeah. What they call the big maintainers is you see now these big motor blades out on the road, these big yellow ones you'll see on the road? They looked just like that only they didn't have a motor on it, they had horses on the front of it.

Q. Did they clear the snow off? Could you travel in the winter?

A. We never did worry about that back in them days!

Flora. We used to ice skate down the middle of the street.

A. They used to just make a track and pull the wagons down. And horses and wagons, they just made a rut and stayed in it. And they hauled ice from out here at Spatz's, and that. And I've seen 'em come into town with a wooden wheel wagon, with a load of ice on it, and they'd be runnin' pretty near hub deep. I was just a little kid then. I'd stand and I'd look out the window at 'em when they'd go by.

Q. That's a pretty good snow for here. Did it snow more then? Did you have more snow than we do now?

A. Yeah, I believe so, because back then we used to get a snow early, like this time of year. And then that snow'd never go off, and you'd just get one snow on top of the other. And then in January, we'd have what they called the January thaw out. And these creeks here would run out of their banks with just meltin' snow water in January. But you don't ever see that any more. You don't see that much water any more.

Q. What was the school like?

A. Well, when I first started, it was pretty strict. It was the old-time teachers. I had a woman teacher downstairs and a man teacher upstairs. And my first teacher was Miss Landon, and she wasn't very big, but she was all woman!

Q. She kept you in line?

A. Yeah. And the man teacher upstairs, that was Henry Beuttel, and when you had a whipping a-comin', he'd give it to you one way or the other! I seen him and one guy get in a fist fight up there.

Q. A student?

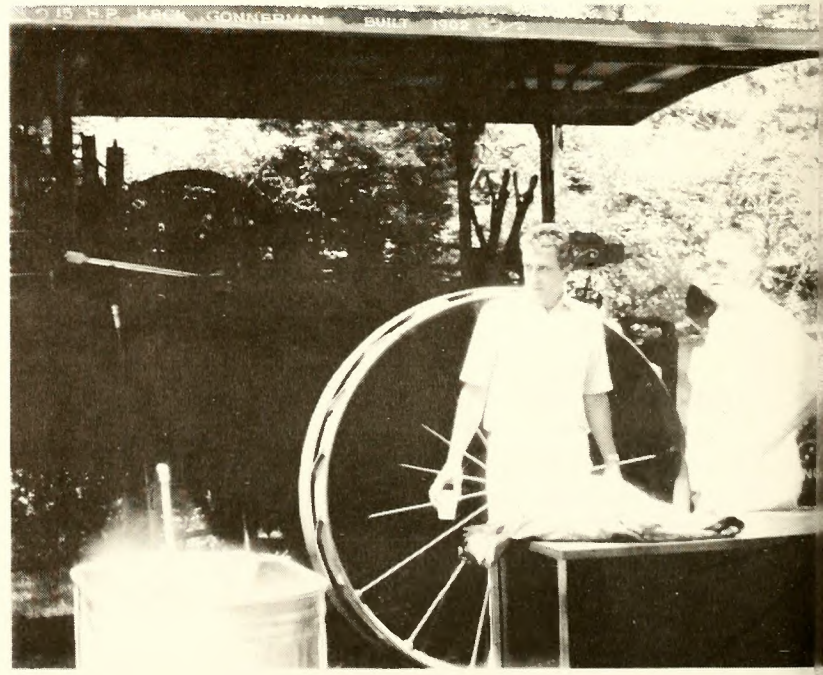
A. A student, yeah. Student come out on the



Steam Added to the 4th of July, 1988

The Village of Elsah had its annual 4th of July potluck picnic with a new attraction -- a steam engine demonstration to raise funds for the Garr Scott Restoration Project. Joe Graziana brought and operated his Keck Gonnerman steam engine to prepare corn for lunch and Village visitors. Bill Abbott provided a viewing of the Eclipse steam engine (which is now in the St. Louis Museum of Transportation), and several of his prime antique cars. Patty and Gerry Taetz along with Bill and Fran Abbott put in yeoman service in husking, cooking and selling the freshly steamed corn.

The day began with a children's bicycle parade which included a full representation of Cronin grandchildren. Music by the Cash Rebates and dancing rounded out the day. Compliments to all the Village families who made this 4th of July a day long to remember. A special thanks is due to Joe Graziana and Bill and Fran Abbott for being part of our Village family for this celebration.

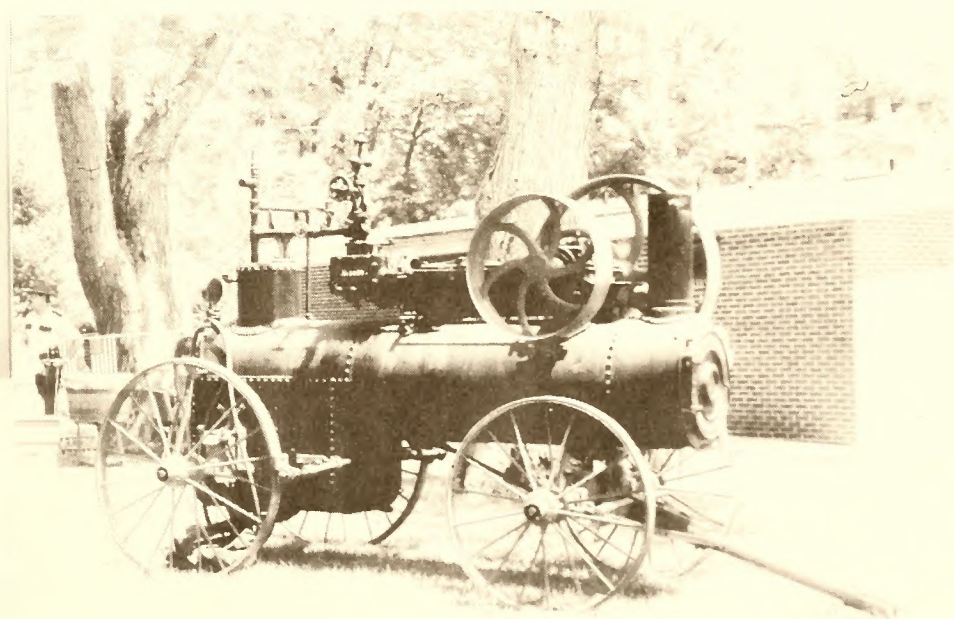




These photos were taken by Edith Pfeifer -



Upper row: The parade as it turned in front of River-view House; the official Cronin mascot; the Cash Rebates; Lower row: Joe Graziana with the 1902 Keck Gonnerman steam engine that provided the boiling water for fresh corn on the cob; Jerry Taetz and Bill Abbott watching over the "corn pot"; Bill Abbott; Mr. Abbott's Eclipse engine which resembles in appearance the Garr Scott engine which will hopefully attract sufficient funding for permanent display in Elsah. If you would like more information about the Garr Scott restoration project, please write to the Elsah Village Board, Box 84, Elsah, Illinois 62028.



worst end of it. He got his whippin'. Us kids was all lined up agin' the old fence on the north side of the schoolhouse, and we was all standing there watchin' it. We knew he was going to get it. He told teacher that the teacher wasn't going to whip him, and so we knew what was going to happen when the teacher turned us loose.

Q. And he let you out of the room?

A. So we run out, we run out. And at that time there was about 50 feet between the schoolhouse on the north side, and then Bill Hunt had a garden and his red palin' fence there. And we'd go out there and lean up agin' that palin' fence and we could look right through them big windows and we could see clear through the room. And we watched it all!

Q. What'd you think?

A. We just didn't want him to get on us!

Q. Was he a nice man, though?

A. Oh yeah. He'd go out and sleighride with us in the wintertime and just have a ball. But whenever you done something that you needed correctin' about, why, he'd correct you one way or the other!

Q. What kind of things would he whip you for?

A. Oh, if you, you know, I mean, do something that you wasn't supposed, tear up something or sumpin' like that, why, that's what he'd get on you about mostly.

Q. So it wasn't about your lessons, then?

A. No, he'd just keep you in on them lessons! Yeah, you'd lose all your recesses and noontime. See, we had a 15-minute recess in the morning and 15-minute in the afternoon and an hour at noontime. And we didn't want to miss them!

Q. How late did you stay in school, about 3 o'clock?

A. No, we went till 4 o'clock-- 9 till 12, and from 1 to 4. That's when we went to school.

Q. You were telling me about the spring and how big it was. Could you tell me about that again? The one down by the Methodist Church?

A. Well, it was a walled-up hole about 10 feet long, and it was about 5 feet wide from outside wall to outside wall. And there were about 4 steps that went down, and you hit your water. And at the bottom of the steps, there was a pool of water about 30 inches deep and about 4 foot square.

Q. Was it clear?

A. Yeah, just clear as crystal. Years ago, when I first started in grade school, we used to get all of our drinking water from that spring there. We had these water fountains, you know, the big glass jugs that they fill with water and then turn 'em upside down and that. Well, that's where we got our water from, for them, for each room, was from that spring there.

Q. Each room would have a water jug like that?

A. Yeah, and it had to be filled every day.

Q. That's a lot of water.

A. Yeah. Of course, there wasn't any traffic. You didn't see one automobile in maybe two days, and everything moved with horse and buggy or wagon. And we used to sleighride off of the hill there by the Post Office where the driveway come down where Snyders made the driveway there. You know, by the Post Office. Well, we used to

go up on the — it's the old railroad bed there, and we'd sleighride from that, and we'd go clear around and we'd end up clear around by where the Christian Science Church is now on the road there, off of that hill there.

Q. That's a pretty good slide.

A. And that's where we used to sleighride all the time. Our teachers and everything, everybody was out there sleighriding right along with us. Then we'd get soaking wet, and each room had a big what we called the pot-belly stoves settin', one in the lower room that set up in the front of the room, and then the upstairs room, it set just as you went in the door. And they had a big metal jacket around 'em. Well, when we come in from sleighriding, we'd all be wet, teacher and everybody, so we'd hang all of our jackets and our gloves and everything up on that steel jacket around the stove to get them dry so they'd be dry for next time, and then we'd move our chairs. We always had a bunch of chairs around because our desks were solid to the floor. They were screwed down solid on the floor, and we'd get our chairs and then everybody'd huddle around this stove and get dried out.

Q. So you'd go out at recess time then?

A. Yeah, we'd dry for recesses!

Q. And the teachers and everything?

A. Oh, yeah, teachers, they sleighride just as fast as we would. We made our own sleds, old box sleds. Didn't want to take time to make a box sled, why, back then, why, you could go in anybody's yard and find the boards 14, 16 inches wide, and 8 or 10 feet long, and then a lot of barrels. There was always a lot of barrels, these heavy, heavy barrel staves.

Q. Big wooden barrels?

A. Yeah, these big wooden barrels with the big heavy ones. And us kids'd never allow one of them to get throwed away. If they did fall apart, why, we saved all of the good staves out of them, and we'd nail them onto the front of these boards, and that was just like a toboggan. We'd get 4 or 5 of us on one of them come down off of that hill!

....

A. We started out in the grade school down here. At the time we had a teacher, and she would have us do plays. And the Methodist Church, they needed curtains for their stage that they used to have for their Christmas programs and that, across the front of the church. And they didn't have the money to buy it, so we put on a play in the old KP Hall down there. And we made more than enough to buy the curtains, and they were real heavy curtains. At that time, they were rather expensive for that time.

Q. Did you charge admission then?

A. Yeah, I don't know just what it was. It wasn't very much. I don't know. It was like maybe 25 cents or something like that per person.

Q. Who came? The people from Elsah, or Beltruses?

A. Yeah, all around, just around the community. And then of course, our Sunday School class at the Methodist Church, we used to put on ice cream socials and such as that. And we used to have a lot of them, and put 'em on out in the lawn out in front of the church there.

Q. Was this a great big class?

A. Yeah, there was about 23 of us in this class.

Q. Who was the teacher now?

A. Mrs. Pellikan was our Sunday School teacher.

We stayed together for, oh, I don't know, something like seven or eight years before the — some of the older ones, they thought we was getting too old for that class. And they were goin' to break it up, and when they did, why, they broke it up good, 'cause a lot of 'em quit and never did come back. And then they tried to get us all to come back and go back into the same group, and a lot of 'em never did come back.

Q. How old were you when they broke you up?

A. Oh, I don't know. We must have been 17 or 18 years old at that time! I don't know. It's just one of the things that they always did do around here was like that.

Q. Put on plays and stuff, socials?

A. Oh yeah, we did quite a bit of that. During the grade school, that was our way of doin'. You know, at that time you didn't have a way of goin' every place like you did now. Not too many people owned cars, so you done everything in the community. Then my dad built a big sleigh, and we always had the team that was sharp shod in the wintertime. We'd get a big snow on, why, they never plowed snow. And he'd get a group together and hook up that sleigh in the evening, and we'd load that old wagon box that was on there. They put side boards on the wagon box and loaded the bottom part about half full of straw. And everybody'd get blankets, and there'd be eight or ten couple on that one sleigh, and we'd go all over. We'd go out through Dow and all over, and come back in and go to somebody's house, and have hot chocolate and popcorn and apples. And that's the way we spent our evenings a lot.

Q. That must have taken all evening, too, to go on a long ride like that?

A. Yeah, we'd go all the way out around Dow and Newbern and come out. Like we'd go out past the cemetery, what they call the Cemetery Road, and go out through that way, and go out through Dow and Newbern. Then we'd go out what they call the Knight Road, and come back into the Salem Road, and then come back in the Elsah Road, and come back into Elsah that way.

....

Q. What can you tell me about the school when you were in the school? Paul Williams said there were lots of pranks you guys played.

A. Well, we did a little bit of everything when we went to school. We used to have — well, you know, at that time you had to make up your own games, you own fun, for recess and noontime and before school and that. And then we, oh, we'd play ball for a while, and then we'd play "Andy over the schoolhouse" and....

Q. What's that?

A. We'd choose up sides, take a — there was a sponge rubber ball, and then we'd throw it over the schoolhouse and try to keep it so they couldn't watch through the windows. That was before this room was built on here. There was just the two-story rock. And then if you caught the ball, why, that's when you'd change sides. And you'd come a-runnin' around, and when you come around,

if the other side didn't see you catch the ball, why, you'd be standin' there, and here they'd come. And whoever they hit with that ball, why, then he had to drop off and go into the side that had caught the ball. And that was one of our games that we did. And then we used to get up on the hill behind the schoolhouse there. There's an old white oak tree still standin' up there. The roots are all bare around it. It had a lot of clay mud in around the tree, and we used to make them get up there when the weather and ground was damp, and we'd cut us long, limber switches, and then we'd make mud balls and stick them on the end of this switch and see how far we could throw them. There was a wooden door on the back of the upper room of the schoolhouse, and we used to plaster that with mud balls. And then the two Keller girls owned the house that Sontag [Taetz] had there, the big rock house that Sontag just sold. And there used to be a big old barn stood behind that, and it was a cooper shop at one time. And we used to just plaster the dickens out of that thing. And we'd get these mud balls stickin' all over it, and they'd come out there, and then they'd call the teacher up and raise cain about it. Then we'd have to go down there and climb up the best way we could and get all that mud off of that building. Well, that's what we's wantin', 'cause we got out of school while we was doin' that! And then the teacher, he'd gonna keep us in for a while, promise us all kinds of things that he was gonna do us if we done it again. It'd go on for maybe a couple days, nothin'd happen, and all at once, why, here we go back to throwin' mud balls again! And we'd do that till we'd get out of school. And then, I don't know, we used to play cork ball.

Q. What's cork ball?

A. Well, you choose up sides, and you can have as many on a team as wanted to play. And actually all you needed was the pitcher and a catcher, and the rest of the players would be kind of like outfielders. And you'd have imaginary bases. And then you had different distance, that if you hit the ball over on a fly, why, that was like first base or second base or a home run. And the ball was a little bitty ball, looked just like a baseball only it was about the size of a golfball, and it was fairly light. And you could take it, and if you got good with it at pitchin', why, you could make that do most anything you wanted it to. I used to pitch a cork ball all the time.

Q. Was it made of cork?

A. It had a cork center and a leather-bound cover, and it looked just like a little miniature baseball, is what it looked like.

Q. You used to pitch?

A. Oh yeah. At one time we had regular cork ball teams here.

Q. Where was that?

A. Right around Elsah here. And we'd get to playin' one another just like they do in baseball now. And that was our Sunday pasttime. Sunday afternoon, why, that's all we'd do, play cork ball, down there on the schoolhouse yard. We used to play ball on it'd be the south side of the schoolhouse there, where the basketball court's at now. And the — what is it — Sunshine Cottage [Pauline Bradley] they call it now across the street there, Reintges

owned that at that time. And they didn't live there all of the time in the wintertime. That was more of a summer cottage for them. And we'd get to playin' ball, and we knocked the ball over. The windows on the basement part where they have the little shop now, we'd knock those windows out. And it'd get pretty raw sometimes, even we'd knock windows out of the schoolhouse. And the school would make our folks pay for 'em, which cost about 25 cents a pane at that time. And you'd knock out too many of 'em, and then Dad'd get on you for that! But every time you knocked a pane out, if they caught you, why, it cost you or your folks 25 cents for that window!

Q. Was that a lot then?

A. Yeah, that was pretty high at that time, pretty high for a piece of glass. Of course, that was something that you didn't want to waste that money on something like that, because that could be avoided, you know! And oh, we used to do things like that. That was the meanest what we did!

Q. You mean you wouldn't do that any more?

A. No, well, not exactly on purpose, but we would always try to hit the house or hit it over, 'cause that was a homerun if we hit it over that house across the street there. Of course, there's a big screen porch on the front, or the windows on the front of the house would get in the way sometimes.

Q. But no one was living there most of the time?

A. No. When she'd come up on a weekend or sumpin' like that, why, then the next week it was pretty rough around school, 'cause she would've been on the teacher about it. The teacher was goin' to get even with somebody, so he'd get on us kids 'cause he knew we were the ones that did it!

Q. Was this the same teacher that had the fight

with the kid?

A. No, not at all, because Henry Beuttel was the schoolteacher when I first went to school upstairs. I mean, he was the upstairs schoolteacher, and Miss Landon was the teacher downstairs. And they were there, oh, I guess, for about the first three years I went to school down here. And then they started a-changin'. And then they had — oh, I can't remember all the teachers' names now.

Q. Did you have a lot of different teachers?

A. Quite a few. Yeah, they'd only last, maybe stay there a couple of years. Maybe some of 'em would only stay one year, some two, some three.

Q. Was that common for them to change in other schools? Or was Elsay just a...?

A. Yeah, they didn't stay at one school too long. And they might just maybe be at the Grafton School or maybe out at Dow or one of these schools out here in the country, 'cause they were a lot of schoolhouses scattered all over the area. Like the Police Youth Camp, there was a school there. And there was a White Oak School, which was out just off the Cemetery Road and down on the Green Acres Road there just a little ways. And then there was a Plain View Schoolhouse, which was right out here where Pauline Watson lives now. That was the Plain View School.

Q. You had a lot of schools around?

A. Yeah. Well, you see, you didn't have no busses. Everybody had to walk. And the kids had to walk to school, that was the reason. And like the Elsay School down here, we'd have each room would be plum full of kids in both rooms. They would come from Chautauqua, the kids that lived the year round up in Fern Glen Valley. And then they'd come from out, oh, from where Tom Holzberlein lives now.

